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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 RANGOON 000161

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/28/2014

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SUBJECT: SPDC TRIES TO ENHANCE "UNDERSTANDING" OF BURMA

Classified By: COM Carmen Martinez for Reasons 1.5 (b,d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: A two day seminar on "Understanding Myanmar" on January 27-28 was certainly the first time we have seen the government willing to discuss its policies in even a reasonably open forum. However, few attendees took the opportunity to publicly push important issues with the often senior-level panelists. All sessions were characterized by a lack of substantive presentations from the panels (expected) and generally laudatory remarks and overwhelming support of Burma's "recent efforts" by the non-diplomat conference attendees. The seminar was useful in some ways: we received a clearer picture of the purported mechanics of the roadmap; it illustrated that the comfort zone that the regime has constructed among its ASEAN neighbors and China, Japan, and India extends deeply into the academe of the region and it shows that in its own clumsy way, the regime sees the need for greater public relations efforts. END SUMMARY.

Khin Nyunt - Ready for Prime Time

12. (C) Before an audience of diplomats and carefully selected friendly academics from around the world, Prime Minister General Khin Nyunt kicked off a two-day conference on "Understanding Myanmar" on January 27. The PM spoke in English, with a TelePrompter, and his message was heavy on unbelievable statistics purportedly demonstrating Burma's alleged advances in health care and higher education. The PM also stressed the country's "steady course in its effort to promote a market-oriented system in spite of the unilateral sanctions instituted by some Western countries." The PM (resplendent in his military uniform and surrounded by a large entourage, many also in uniform) stressed familiar themes, such as the importance of national unity and peace and stability as prerequisites for a transition to a democratic system. The PM took no questions after his circa 20-minute speech, although, in somewhat presidential fashion, he remained in the meeting hall shaking hands and chatting with diplomats and academics amidst the glare of camera flashes (FYI: A reliable embassy contact with very good access to the highest levels of the SPDC told the COM later that the PM and his entourage had wanted to appear in national dress rather than military uniforms, but after an exhaustive attempt to convince Senior General Than Shwe of the public relations benefit of this tactic, he insisted on the military regalia).

We Have the Roadmap - Here's How to Read It

13. (U) Throughout the address on the regime's road map, "Burma Road Map to Democracy: The Way Forward," presented by Deputy Foreign Minister Khin Maung Win, there was no specific mention at all of the NLD or its leader Aung San Suu Kyi (ASSK). However, the DepForMin made what may have been the only direct allusion to the NLD and ASSK, noting that the previous National Convention had failed because of the "activities of one person and one political party".

14. (U) The DepForMin mercifully did not read a prepared paper, instead speaking extemporaneously in English for around 40 minutes and smoothly, although superficially, addressing questions such as the significance of the road map ("it is a demonstration of our commitment to democratic principles"), timing for the National Convention ("this year"), and what Burma means by "disciplined democracy" ("a democracy that does not adversely effect historical traditions or national unity"). The DepForMin provided an outline of the envisioned future Burmese democratic state, which will include an executive president limited to two, five-year terms; a bicameral legislature, one elected by national vote and the other comprised of equal numbers of representatives from each of Burma's states; regional legislatures headed by Chief Ministers; and judicial organs at the center and in the regions. The DepForMin asserted that Burma would not go back to a one-party state and would have a multi-party system based on the "universal principles of liberty, justice and equality." In regard to reconvening the National Convention, the DepForMin said that it would be a continuation of the previous one (a point he reiterated several times) and that its composition would not change. In

terms of party delegates, it would be entirely up to the individual parties to determine who to send to the reconvened Convention.

15. (C) After the DepForMin concluded his presentation, there were several interventions in which participants from several ASEAN countries as well as China and Japan read universally laudatory prepared statements regarding the road map. In the ensuing Q and A session, the COM asked the DepForMin what policies were being developed and what measures would be put in place to give its citizens the knowledge and confidence to express their needs and opinions in a free and open manner. But he was spared answering when the panel chairman declared the session closed. During the break between sessions, the DepForMin told the COM he could not answer this publicly but there would be programs to advise the citizens of their right to express their opinions "as long as they did not adversely affect the stability of the country."

Peace and Stability - What It Takes to Get Them Back In the Fold

16. (U) During the session on "Efforts for the Prevalence of Peace and Stability", Brigadier-General Kyaw Thein, the Office of the Chief of Military Intelligence Head of Department and chief interlocutor on drug issues, focused on what he described as the indispensable role of "genuine" peace mediators during the Government's negotiations with Burma's various insurgent groups. In conclusion, Kyaw Thein stressed that success depended on the commitment of both sides and that the Government maintains an open door policy in regard to talking to remaining armed insurgent groups. One of the panelists, retired Professor U Htun Aung Chien, an ethnic Karen who was identified as having played a significant role in the KNU negotiations, made a number of interesting albeit vague remarks about the importance of both trust and "gentleman's agreements" in achieving positive results. Neither the presenter nor the panelists mentioned the importance of a tripartite dialogue to the achievement of lasting peace or stability.

Suppression of Narcotic Drugs - It's a Myanmar Problem

17. (SBU) Perhaps the most professional and straightforward presentation was that of Police Colonel Hkam Awng, Joint Secretary of the Central Committee for Drug Abuse. Col. Hkam

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Awng is our key police contact and has worked closely with DEA for many years. His presentation, in nearly flawless English, relied on slides with statistics from the UNODC and the joint US/Burma opium yield surveys that have been taking place since 1993. He emphasized that precursor chemicals for amphetamine and heroin production are not manufactured in Burma and that cultivation and production were steadily declining. The presentation was notable in its emphasis on Burma's responsibility for the situation and for the detailed explanation of its efforts to combat its narcotics problem. There was little attempt to blame the US or other western countries. The only reference to external influences was that "...the much lower level of inflow of external assistance has" not "diminished Myanmar's determination" to overcome the problem, and he asked that "more and more countries...join hands with Myanmar."

Foreign Relations -- Metaphors and Allusions

19. (SBU) Director General of the MOFA's Political Department U Thauang Thun led the first session on January 28 on "Priorities in Burma's Foreign Policy." In contrast to the Deputy Foreign Minister's presentation the day before, the DG did not stray from his prepared remarks and gave little more than a historical overview of significant events in Burma's recent history, beginning with its loss of independence to the British. The highlight was the somewhat dated example given to illustrate Burma's independent foreign policy -- the stand Burma took in 1956 UN voting on the Hungarian issue (pre-dating the military's seizure of power in 1962). The DG did make several enigmatic and unscripted remarks during his speech, including, "you can either have a beautiful mosaic or a house of Babel" in regards to the national races issue and "if it is true that whoever rules the heartland rules all, Burma is the heartland," during his comments on the strategic location of Burma between south and southeast Asia.

How Many Bridges Does it take To Build an Economy?

10. (C) The presentation on Burma's economic and development situation was equally fatuous. The main speaker, the rector of Burma's Institute of Economics, turned in a superb performance as a talking head giving a stupefying 40 minute regurgitation of the SPDC's propaganda (roads and bridges equal development). He insisted the current government had taken great strides in economic reform, but could only come up with one example -- the loosening of restrictions on the private sector for trading and exporting rice.

Unfortunately, the SPDC had "temporarily" suspended this very liberalization not three weeks ago. The most useful contribution came from one of the designated discussants who gingerly proposed that the private sector in Burma needs better "enabling conditions and more stability" and that Burma's system needs to provide a social safety net for people and for businesses that fail.

The United Nations - Cooperation Burmese Style

11. (SBU) The MOFA's Director General for International Organizations and Economic Affairs U Win Mra gave a presentation on "Cooperation with the United Nations." He talked mostly about human rights rather than UN cooperation, bemoaning the "undeserved" foreign criticism of Burma's human rights record, clarifying for all that "the Government protects human rights by providing food and shelter to the people." U Win Mra proudly noted that Burma was the first country to sign the 1949 Universal Declaration on Human Rights, "which forever associates Burma with the values of the declaration." He neglected to mention that the 1949 signature was made by a new democratic government. The DG said globalization has brought exposure to human rights in the country, that it was impossible to even hold a discussion like this in the past, and that "we are trying to change, step by step -- gradually." On forced labor, U Win Mra announced the GOB has brought laws into line with international expectations, and will carry out the ILO's plan of action. On AIDS, he took umbrage with outsiders who say "we aren't giving enough money to fight HIV/AIDS -- we are!"

12. (C) Conveniently, the DG spoke so long that there was little time for real discussion or questions. However, a Malaysian attendee managed to squeeze in a final word, lauding the GOB on its labor practices, asking "why only now do other countries care about using porters when Asian militaries and the British used them for years." When Emboffs buttonholed the DG after his presentation, U Win Mra agreed that it would be better for Burma if the GOB allowed diplomats and press to travel and report on what is really happening in the countryside, instead of forcing total reliance on Burmese exiles in Thailand for news. Regarding the March release of the Human Rights Report on Burma, U Win Mra seemed genuinely interested in updating the Embassy next time around on positive actions the GOB has taken in reported cases of rapes in ethnic areas, but cautioned that the military doesn't want to be embarrassed by an international investigation such as the one Special Rapporteur Pinheiro has proposed.

Human Rights - Nobody Likes Me, Everybody Hates Me...

13. (C) The most disappointing and cliché'd performance was that of Burma's Ambassador to the UK, Kyaw Win. Rather than the theme of a Burma intent on pursuing an independent foreign policy and reliant on its own resources as set out by the Prime Minister and echoed in the presentations of the DepForMin and others, Ambassador Kyaw Win presented an endlessly detailed litany (complete with Power Point) of Burma's victimization by the US and others through a corruption of the mechanisms of the UN. He also characterized political opposition to the regime as merely a "reflection of the desires of western countries." At the end of his presentation, a few very supportive interventions were allowed (one by a British invitee who lauded the government's strides in addressing the need for training in human rights, labor rights, etc., and the other a garment factory owner lambasting the US for the trade ban which he claimed destroyed his business), followed by an attempt to close the session quickly by eyeballing the audience and claiming there were obviously no questions.

14. (C) However, the COM and the UK Ambassador in Rangoon insisted on asking questions to the dismay of the session chair. The COM asked Kyaw Win why his presentation, with its portrayal of Burma as a victim rather than as a country intent on pursuing an independent foreign policy, was so at odds with the vision presented by the Prime Minister and other members of the senior leadership. Kyaw Win at first pretended he did not understand the question (he speaks flawless English) and when the COM repeated her question, he said he just wanted to "explain the evolution of the UN process" and would say no more. The UK Ambassador then rose to challenge his point about the democratic opposition being a reflection of the West, pointing out that it was a reflection of the will of the Burmese people as expressed in the 1990 elections. The UK Ambassador also said she would welcome the chance to continue this debate in the session or in the press, noting that of course this would not be possible as there is no free press. The session was immediately brought to a close.

Comment

16. (C) This was certainly the first time we've seen the government willing to discuss its policies in even a

reasonably open forum. However, few attendees took the opportunity to publicly push important issues with the often senior-level panelists. All sessions were characterized by a lack of substantive presentations from the panels (expected) and generally laudatory remarks and overwhelming support of Burma's "recent efforts" by the non-diplomat conference attendees (disappointing). Although several academics asked questions and made minor suggestions which could have been construed as being (at least a teeny, weeny bit) critical of the regime there was no genuine dialogue or exchange of ideas. Even the Indian Ambassador, who can be counted on to be sympathetic to the regime's performances, remarked to the COM how "inappropriate" it was for the PM and his entourage to show up in uniform and behave as if it was a "state occasion" when the event was purported to be an academic seminar. He also remarked that a conference on Burma during which no one mentioned the NLD or Aung San Suu Kyi was not a real conference. Burma specialist Dr. Robert Taylor commented that "he had learned little" from the seminar. Interestingly, many of us were apparently in a different seminar from former UK Ambassador to Thailand Derek Tonkin, who made an intervention praising the seminar as "the non-governmental face" of the Bangkok Process, and as heralding a "new dawn for democracy."

17. (C) The seminar was useful in some ways: we received a clearer picture of the purported mechanics of the roadmap; it illustrates that the comfort zone that the regime has constructed among its ASEAN neighbors and China, Japan, and India includes academia as well as governments; and it shows that in their own clumsy way, the regime sees the need for public relations efforts. It also shows that Senior General Than Shwe can tell PM Khin Nyunt what to wear.
Martinez